A Mixed Martial Artist and a Journalist Walk Into A Bar
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A Mixed Martial Artist and a Journalist Walk Into A Bar

by Misthios

Summary

The woman at the bar has been pretending not to watch Vi for the last hour. Usually, Vi would be the last person to object – the woman is around her age, with sharp, focused eyes and a mouth Vi would love *to get a begrudging smile out of – but it isn't the first time she's seen her. Not just in* The Last Drop*, either. The woman always has that same, calculated focus, and is constantly glancing down to write in the notebook she always carries.*

The woman at the bar has been pretending not to watch Vi for the last hour. Usually, Vi would be the last person to object – the woman is around her age, with sharp, focused eyes and a mouth Vi would *love* to get a begrudging smile out of – but it isn't the first time she's seen her. Not just in *The Last Drop,* either. The woman always has that same, calculated focus, and is constantly glancing down to write in the notebook she always carries.

Vi sinks into her chair, rocking on its back legs in what she hopes is a show of nonchalance. She half-tunes into the debate Powder and Ekko are having about something she'll never understand and finishes her drink. She spends a moment holding the grubby glass to the light, staring forlornly at its empty glory, and claps a hand on Powder's shoulder.

She tells her she'll be back in a moment and heads for the bar. Not quickly, and not straight towards the woman now staring intently at her phone as though her attention has been nowhere else all night. She greets a few familiar faces, accepts their raucous congratulations on her latest win, and meanders through the crowd.

It doesn't work. The woman catches on before Vi can break out into a brisk stride. She gathers up her notebook, slides far too much money for her drink across the bar, and pulls her jacket on as she hurries for the exit.

The door swings shut behind her. Vi barrels through, wastes half a second adjusting to the dark of the night spliced apart by neon signs offering food and drink and companionship, but sees the woman duck into an alleyway.

Hoping Vi will rush straight past in search for her, no doubt. Backing herself into a corner in hopes of salvation.

Vi takes her time. She rounds the corner, leans an elbow against the wall, and raises her brow in greeting.

"I'm sorry, I really must—" the woman blurts out, trying to march past Vi as though everyone takes a wrong turn into an alley at night.

With a few swift moves, Vi has the woman pinned against the wall, arm twisted between her shoulder blades.

"Why are you following me?" Vi demands. The woman's face-first against a brick wall, but Vi's careful. She hasn't done anything to hurt her. Not yet. "Are you a cop?"

"*Am I a*—no, I most certainly am not, thank you very much," the woman says with an indignant scoff. "If you must know, I'm a journalist."

Huh. The answer catches Vi off-guard. Her grip on the woman's wrist slackens, but the woman is smart enough not to struggle free.

"That doesn't answer my first question. Why have you been following me?"

"As I said! I'm a journalist, and my editor thought I needed to *branch out* into more palatable, human-interest stories," the woman says.

"You're *still* not answering my question," Vi says, regaining her grip. "Aren't journalists supposed to be smart?"

"You can't—can't draw your own conclusions?" the woman asks. She's a little breathless, panic making her chest rise and fall heavily, and Vi belatedly realises there was probably a better way to get answers. "You are Vi, aren't you? The, ah. MMA fighter?"

She speaks the words as though they're part of a foreign language. They don't fit with her accent, with the way she holds herself when she *isn't* forced against an alley wall. She stood out at the bar, too. Not only because of the way she dressed, but in the way her shoulders never fell and her eyes never settled on anything but Vi for more than a few seconds.

Vi glances down. The flickering streetlight at the end of the alley is enough to make out the woman's shoes: they're not the tough boots cops always wear undercover.

Vi lets go of her. The woman stumbles back, hand cradling the wrist Vi clung to.

"You're a journalist, hanging out in a dive bar, writing a *human-interest* piece on me? Without coming up to *talk* to me? Why'd you run when I came over?"

Vi's blocking the woman's only exit, arms folded over her chest.

"As I said, this is new territory for me. Fluff pieces aren't generally my forte." There's something in her voice that teeters on the edge of condescension, only offset by her heavy breathing and unblinking eyes. "I've mostly worked in investigative journalism before this, and each story has

entailed its own risks."

"So, what? You were worried I might chase you into a dark alley and pin you against the wall? Something like that?"

Regaining herself enough to dust off her clothes and adjust the hem of her shirt, the woman says, "I can't imagine *what* would've given me that impression."

Vi grins. Anger flashes across the woman's flushed face, and Vi relents. She leans against the wall, giving her all the space she needs for a hasty exit.

The woman takes a tentative step forward, then another. Once they're shoulder to shoulder, Vi takes in all the woman's told her.

Vi's been fighting her whole life. For so long, it got her into nothing but trouble, lost her more than it gained. But add a few cameras, a crowd, a handful of rules, and suddenly, she has something like a steady income to her name.

People are starting to recognise her. Her matches are shown on honest-to-god TVs. She cocks her head, holds the woman's gaze, and gives in to curiosity.

"You're really writing a story on me? What, some kind of redemption arc? Ex-con makes her way in the world by pummelling opponents senseless in the name of entertainment? A rags to the slightly-better-rags story?" Vi asks.

"I was given the assignment and intend to do my level best," the woman says.

Bathed in the flickering glow of a streetlight, she's reclaimed some of her dignity. Her hair is askew, likely for the first time in her life, but she holds herself tall and rigid.

"I've got a fight next Saturday. I'll be here, celebrating, if I win," Vi calls after her.

The woman continues down the street, only stopping once she's almost out of earshot.

"If tonight is anything to go by, I'm sure I'll see you next week."

*

Vi wins her fight. It was obvious she would to her and every bookie in town, but Vi has something other than the natural urge to win a brawl pushing her on. The woman from last week, the woman who she pinned against the wall but didn't get the name of, will be waiting at *The Last Drop*. Vi doesn't want to disappoint; she doesn't want the woman sitting there, swatting away the other patrons like flies.

Vi has a plan. She's been piecing it together for the last few days. She'll walk into the bar to a crowd of cheers, fight no doubt broadcasted on *The Last Drop's* one working TV, get herself a drink, and lean with her elbows rested on the sticky bar top. She'll catch the woman's eye, raise her glass in a silent toast, and when she finally deigns saunter over, say something like, *With all the fun we were having last week, I never got your name.*

Most of it goes to plan. Half of it. *Some*. Vi's met with applause but only gets halfway to the bar.

The woman is waiting for her, table set up for an interview: she has her notebook and pen lined up perfectly parallel with one another, and what Vi's pretty sure is a voice recorder with an actual cassette in it.

The woman points her into the seat opposite her. Vi only falls into it because the adrenaline of the fight has left her, and it's been *hours* since she wasn't either bouncing on her feet or pinned under someone's body.

"My name is Caitlyn Kiramman. You can see my identification and affiliations here," the woman begins, pointing to the work ID on a lanyard placed by her notepad. "Anything said tonight is, naturally, subject to review, and you'll have the opportunity to appraise the piece before going to publication."

She rattles off her speech as though she's given it a hundred times. Vi's been interviewed before, but it's never been this formal. As formal as anything in the middle of *The Last Drop* can be, anyway. She's used to microphones in her face and questions shouted over the crowd. Vi picks up the ID and toys with it, glancing between the photo and the woman – Caitlyn – sat across from her.

It's infuriating. Not only does the photo on the ID look like Caitlyn, but it's a good picture, too.

"Straight to business, huh? Not gonna buy a girl a drink first?" Vi asks.

Caitlyn parts her lips to answer, but in the same instant, Powder swings an arm around Vi's shoulders, slides a drink onto the table, and leaves a loud, wet kiss on her cheek like an overexcited golden retriever.

Vi pats her back and Powder disappears back to their usual table with the others.

Caitlyn raises her brow in question.

"My kid sister," Vi says, grinning stupidly and taking a long, deep drink of the ale Powder's gifted her. "So. What do you want to know? What do the fans want to know?"

"You have fans?" Caitlyn asks, but for the first time, her voice isn't pinched and serious. "Outside of this fine establishment, of course."

"Oh, tonnes. Dozens. Hundreds. I can't keep count. I've signed, oh, six autographs?"

The corner of Caitlyn's mouth quirks into the start of a smile. Vi takes another drink, watching Caitlyn over the rim of the glass.

"Well, in your relatively brief career, you have garnered quite the reputation for yourself. There's no shortage of talk about you, and little of it is foreboding," Caitlyn says.

Vi thinks it might be a compliment.

"Big MMA fan, Cait?"

"I can't say I've had much exposure to the sport," she says, sounding out the word *sport* slowly, like she's had to practise not thinking of it as something else.

"What, don't own a TV? MMA is on, like, half the channels now. It's mainstream. The men's matches, anyway."

"I've little interest," Caitlyn says, eyes on her notepad.

“Oh? How about the women’s?”

Caitlyn looks not at Vi, but the voice recorder in the centre of the table, red button pushed down.

“I looked into it for this piece, naturally. I like to be thorough in my research.”

“Mmhmm.”

Vi doesn’t doubt that. She doesn’t doubt that Caitlyn Kiramman is a *very* serious journalist, and she has absolutely no idea why Caitlyn’s in a bar like *The Last Drop*, interviewing someone like her.

“Well!” Caitlyn says, clicking the end of her pen though it’s already poised to write. “I suppose we ought to start from the beginning. What led you to the world of MMA, Vi?”

Vi waits until Caitlyn meets her gaze to answer. She hits all the talking points, diluting years of her life, her whole damn life, into neat little bullet points some stranger will scan in print, killing time on the morning commute.

Growing up on the streets with a little sister to protect. Having to fight for what she needed and defend what she had. Dodging a system that would do its utmost to tear them apart and finding something like a family of their own. Working from her early teens to keep the creaky roof over their head, doing her best to keep everyone together, despite the police hounding them day in, day out. Incarceration as a teen. Losing her sister after everything. Years in prison, focusing on nothing but getting out, getting back to Powder and the others; having to fight to see her own sister, caught up in the foster system, once she was finally out.

She doesn’t go into detail. She doesn’t give way to emotion. Still, Caitlyn listens with a singular focus, barely blinking. The more Vi talks, the more the sounds of the bar fade away. Caitlyn’s stopped writing, but it’s no loss. The voice recorder is still rolling.

“So,” Vi says, needing a way to wrap it all up. “I guess it was a natural fit.”

Caitlyn reaches across the table, into the space between them, and Vi presses her fingertips into the scarred, sticky tabletop. With a *click*, Caitlyn stops the recorder.

Vi glances between it and Caitlyn, knowing this was a stupid idea, knowing she’d say the wrong thing, too many things, and it’s all there on tape, even with the din of *The Last Drop* providing a soundtrack.

“What? Too much? Not fluffy enough?” Vi asks when Caitlyn says nothing.

“No, no. Not at all, Vi,” Caitlyn says, voice a murmur. “This is new to me. Interviewing people about their personal lives, rather than stories about corporate corruption and political espionage and whatnot. I would never have taken this assignment, given a choice, but—”

Caitlyn waves a hand, looking for the right words.

“But I didn’t disappoint, huh?”

“It’s an interesting challenge,” Caitlyn agrees, turning the recorder back on. “Now, I was wondering. If I might ask, your outfit—uniform. Obviously, there’s a degree of standardisation, regulations to follow, but I noticed – it’s hard not, honestly – some manner of emblem on your shorts. A badge—a flag, really.”

Vi grins. She grins so hard she doesn’t realise her glass is empty until she’s tipped it all the way

back. Caitlyn, professional to a fault, is stumbling over a straightforward question. The flag of pink and orange stripes is difficult to miss on her shiny black shorts.

“Yep,” Vi says.

“*Yep*?” Caitlyn asks.

“I’m out there, half-naked, putting my all into not getting the shit kicked out of me. Why not have everything out in the open, huh?”

“Why not,” Caitlyn says. “Now—your charity work. Let’s talk a little about that.”

“Huh. Never really considered it *work*. It’s just like, disadvantaged kids know what disadvantaged kids need, right? Figured I could at least give the places that actually helped Powder and me a little exposure until the money starts rolling in.”

They talk for a while longer. *Two hours* longer, Vi realises, when she finally checks the time. It isn’t all about MMA, but most of it is Vi-adjacent, and there’s a simple pleasure in seeing the woman opposite her relax, as though she’s been coming to *The Last Drop* since she was old enough to get her hands on a fake ID.

Caitlyn realises how long they’ve been there at the same moment. She begins apologising, thanking Vi for her time, but she’s certain Vi must be *exhausted* from her evening’s fight. It takes Vi a moment to remember she’d been in the ring, under the heavy fluorescent lights.

“What’s with this?” Vi asks, placing a finger on the now-still voice recorder. “You know your phone will do the same job, right?”

“I dislike the distraction. If I’m working, I don’t want an errant phone call or unexpected message to interrupt my thought process,” Caitlyn says.

“Weird. So, you could be writing about me but completely miss a text from me?”

Caitlyn stops fussing with her belongings and holds Vi’s gaze.

“Well. You don’t have my number, so it is purely a hypothetical situation,” Caitlyn says, and *there’s* that smile Vi’s been chasing.

“Oh?” Vi says, chin propped in her palm. “But you have mine.”

Vi slides Caitlyn’s notebook across the table and drops her pen atop it. Caitlyn looks down in surprise, not often caught off-guard, and sighs at the messy number scrawled across her neat, tiny notes. She closes the notebook, slips it into her bag, and gets to her feet.

“Thank you for your time, Vi,” she says, holding out a hand. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“Sure thing, Cupcake. It’s been real.”

She shakes Caitlyn’s hand before she can react and slinks back over to her usual corner of the bar, smile on her face.

*

Vi's flat doesn't have much in the way of square footage or rooms, but it's *hers*. It's in a better part of town that she ever thought she could afford, available to her by virtue of it being near-enough invisible. From the high street, if you stand in the right position and squint, there's a semblance of an alleyway between the newsagent and dry cleaners. When she brings her shopping home, Vi has to walk crabwise to get down it. After a few twists and turns over uneven paving, a metal staircase bolted into the ground and adjoining walls leads to her own little paradise.

The flat boasts two rooms: a bathroom and a living room-slash-kitchen-slash-bedroom. It was an utter shithole when Vi moved in, but she sanded down the scuffed, stained floor, ripped away the wallpaper, laid down fresh paint, tore the bathroom apart and rebuilt it tile-by-tile, and even got some decent lights for the place. She's proud of it. She may have afforded it through a few not-strictly legal bets placed on herself – bets that she'd *win* – but that's neither here nor there.

Vi slides the balcony door open and sits herself down with half a loaf of bread's worth of toast. A punching bag hangs to her right, a dead potted plant sits at her side, and though houses take up much of the view, it's better than the bare walls she spent so many years staring at.

Her phone buzzes in her back pocket. Holding a slice of toast between her teeth, Vi lifts her hips to retrieve it.

+44 7342...

Hello, Vi. This is Caitlyn Kiramman. I thought I'd repay the favour and send you my number.

Vi:

no need to be so formal

you're the only Caitlyn i've met today

get home safe, Cupcake?

Cait (journalist):

I wasn't accosted in any alleyways, if that's what you're inquiring.

And clearly I need to use my full name. You appear incapable of using it.

Vi:

you don't like Cupcake?

Cait (journalist):

Why Cupcake?

Vi:

cause you're sweet

like a cupcake

:)

Cait (journalist):

Pardon?

Vi:

just saying

people usually shove mics in my face when i'm reeling from a fight

then misquote me

you stopped recording to check it was all ok

so

sweet

Cait (journalist):

Well.

I'm glad it was a comfortable experience for you.

Vi:

sure was

so

when do i get to read it?

Cait (journalist):

Once I've written it.

Vi:

damn

guess you'd better get some sleep

Cait (journalist):

I suppose I'd better.

Goodnight, Vi.

Vi:

night Cupcake

*

Vi doesn't hear from Caitlyn over the next week. Not that she was expecting to. She doubts a story about *her* is the sort of thing they need to rush to page one. Vi checks her phone a few times, idly

hoping for an update on the piece that'll give her an excuse to talk to Caitlyn, but in all honesty, it's a shit week. Vi doesn't notice the days flying past.

She has back-to-back shifts at her side jobs, and Powder has one of the worst bouts of anxiety she's suffered in years. Ekko calls her in a panic, and Vi spends three nights with her sister in Vander's place above *The Last Drop*. She's so busy she barely has time to train – not that training will ever be more important than looking after Powder – and before she knows it, she has another fight lined up.

It isn't pretty. She wins, but it isn't pretty. She doesn't bother showering afterwards, just pulls on her joggers in the changing room and escapes through the backdoor, not wanting to deal with sports reporters or the flash of cameras.

Once she's home, buses taking twice as long as usual for whatever stupid reason, Vi falls on her bed in the corner of the main room. She hasn't bothered with the lights. The night sky is thick with cloud cover, and the only light that pours into the room comes from the street lights outside.

Vi steadies her breathing. She won! She should be ecstatic, celebrating with her friends, but it's been a tough week. She's exhausted. She has no problem losing a fight to someone better than her, someone who works harder, but the mere thought of losing because she's tired and distracted leaves a sour taste in her throat.

She'll have to drop some of those side-jobs sooner or later. She can't train *and* spend her nights working as a bouncer *and* run deliveries for half a dozen different restaurants. Still, Powder has trouble with consistent work, and it's Vi's job to provide for her. Maybe this whole MMA thing will *really* start paying off, if only she can focus on training.

Vi pulls out her phone, firing off a text to Powder. Powder replies that she's fine, smiley face, she's watching a film with Claggor. Vi lets out a sigh of relief, drops her phone onto her pillow, but it lights up before she can close her eyes.

Cait (journalist):

Are you alright, Vi?

Vi:

huh?

Cait (journalist):

It appeared as if your opponent broke your nose!

Vi:

wait wait wait

you were watching my match?

Cait (journalist):

Of course. I'm still working on the piece and need to ensure I have the whole picture. I can't very well write about a topic I don't understand in its entirety. The readers will see right through me.

Vi:

but you were watching my match?

Cait (journalist):

We've established this.

Please just let me know if you're alright. That was rather a lot of blood.

Vi:

all part of the job

it's not broken btw

i've broken it enough times to know how that feels

Cait:

Regardless, it looked painful.

Vi:

whatcha gonna do if i'm not ok

gonna come to my rescue?

Cait:

If needs be.

Vi:

cute

i'm sure you have better ways to spend a saturday night

Cait:

You still haven't told me whether you're alright, which leads me to suspect the worst.

Vi:

better come save me then

Cait:

What's your address?

Vi's sat bolt upright, legs crossed, nose almost pressed to her screen. She didn't expect that to work. She might not know Caitlyn well, but she gets the feeling she isn't the sort of person to joke about this sort of thing. Or anything.

Hopping to her feet, Vi slaps the light on. The flat's clean, it always is, and she met Caitlyn in *The Last Drop*. Caitlyn can't be expecting anything prim and proper from her. Vi walks in circles, staring at her phone, fussing with the cushions on the sofa that doubles as a pull-out bed for Powder.

Vi opens the fridge. There's half a bottle of hot sauce, some bean sprouts past their best, and an empty soda bottle. Laughing at herself, she sends Caitlyn her address and a set of complicated instructions for actually finding the flat.

With the initial wave of panic and excitement done, Vi settles on the sofa, eyes closed. She really is so, *so* tired. She has no idea where Caitlyn lives, no clue how long it will take her to get there, but she rests her eyes for just a moment.

A knock at the door wakes her. Vi bolts to her feet and opens it so quickly she forgets who'd be on the other side. Caitlyn, as tense as she's ever been, grips the railing of the metal staircase and peers cautiously into the flat, hoping to see Vi but expecting someone else.

"What is it with you and alleyways," Caitlyn says, striding into the flat as Vi swings out an arm in greeting. She stops short in the centre of the room, having expected something bigger. "And you—look at you! You haven't even cleaned the blood from your face."

Caitlyn points her back to the sofa. The next thing Vi knows, Caitlyn has dropped her bag of mysterious goodies on the floor and is sat in front of her, tilting Vi's head back and wiping her face with a warm, damp cloth.

She tuts to herself, mumbling something about the black eye already forming.

"You're good at this, Cupcake," Vi says, not hating the unnecessary attention.

"My father's a doctor," Caitlyn says, attentive in her work.

"Of course he is," Vi sighs.

Caitlyn doesn't let Vi rest until she's taken a handful of painkillers and anti-inflammatories, and let her check her nose isn't *actually* broken. It's ridiculous, really. It was a staged match, waged for the sake of sport, not survival, with paramedics on-hand in case something bad *actually* happened. No one's ever made so much needless fuss of her, not even when she was a kid, brawling on the streets.

"There. Better," Caitlyn says. "You should—"

"I should what?"

"I was going to say *you should be more careful*, but I suppose that's all part of the appeal, isn't it?" Caitlyn asks.

There's finally a little levity in her voice.

"Yep. You don't win titles without breaking a few bones," Vi says. "Yours and others."

Caitlyn gives a bemused smile, not understanding the sentiment at all.

"What else you got in that bag of yours?" Vi asks, tilting her head towards it.

Caitlyn places it on the sofa between them, holding it open for Vi to see. Inside is the most

extensive first-aid kit Vi has ever seen, most of which is no good to her, along with a few chocolate bars and a bottle of coke.

“I thought you might need a boost,” Caitlyn says, clearly a little embarrassed.

“Gimme,” Vi says, hands delving into the bag.

She opens the drink with a soft hiss, downing half of it in one go. It’s only with the chocolate in one hand and the drink in the other that Vi realises how *hungry* she is. She bites into the chocolate with a grin, Caitlyn’s gaze on her all the while, and also realises she’s covered in sweat, hair sticking every which way.

Most of the sweat isn’t even hers.

“Listen,” Vi says, swallowing painfully. “Give me ten minutes to shower, then we’ll pick up dinner. My treat.”

“There’s no need for that,” Caitlyn protests. “I only came to ensure you were safe, which you are. I won’t take up any more of your evening.”

“What evening?” Vi asks, winning Caitlyn over with a grin.

Vi takes the fastest shower of her life, and she’s never been one to linger. The half-empty bottle of shower gel claims to smell like mint and some kind of leaf, and Vi guesses it’s better than dried human sweat. She towels her short hair half-dry, rakes it into place with her fingers, and pulls on clean, crumpled clothes.

She slips back into the living room-bedroom-kitchen. Caitlyn’s stood at the far wall, taking in some of the prints on display.

“These are good,” Caitlyn says simply, noticing Vi’s return.

Good. Not *interesting* or *unique*. She genuinely likes them.

“Middle one’s by my kid sister,” Vi says. “So? What are you in the mood for, Cupcake?”

“This is your territory. I expect you’re familiar with most of the cuisine on offer,” Caitlyn says. “You choose. You’ll need something filling after what you did to that chocolate bar.”

Vi raises a brow. Caitlyn doesn’t drop her gaze.

“What can I say? I like sweet things.”

Vi opens the door for Caitlyn. They shuffle out into the high street, walking side by side as though this isn’t the first time they’ve done it. Caitlyn has an easy way about her, despite how uptight she first appeared; not that Caitlyn seems aware of the ease that could be hers, if only she stopped looking at every shadow like someone was about to spring out of it.

They settle on a Chinese place a few minutes’ walk away. The staff all know Vi, know her favourites, and she orders them and more. She’s absolutely starved, and she wants Caitlyn to have a variety to pick from.

“I don’t know how you ever find your way home,” Caitlyn mutters as she backtracks, having missed the turning altogether. “Getting post must be an absolute nightmare.”

“Sure is. Once a week, if I’m lucky,” Vi says, dinner bundled in her arms.

They eat on the balcony. It's a warm enough night for it, and it's the only place Vi has something resembling a table. Taking a wild guess, she doesn't think Caitlyn is the sort of person who eats off her lap on the sofa. Vi brings them plates, pours their drinks, and opens all the dishes for them to pick at.

Caitlyn doesn't scowl at the food. She doesn't use her chopsticks to turn over this and that, suspicious of the contents. She takes to it easily, eating with real vigour; she almost matches Vi's pace.

Vi wonders when she last had a takeaway.

They talk, for a while, about much of nothing. Vi pries a few more details of Caitlyn's job from her, but she can tell there's something Caitlyn doesn't want to linger on. Vi rolls the conversation on, telling Caitlyn how long she's lived in the flat, how much work she's done on the place, and how weird it still feels to have somewhere to come home to.

"It's strange," Caitlyn says later, once she's more or less done with her meal. She stares into the cheap wine they grabbed from the corner store, delicately served in a chipped mug, and swirls the liquid around. "When we first met, you accused me of being a police officer."

"I asked if you were a *cop*," Vi says, offended anyone would ever think she'd be that polite. "And why is it strange? You were watching me, *stalking* me, and you bolted when I approached you!"

Caitlyn laughs through her nose, having had just enough of the bland wine to talk freely.

"It's strange because I used to be an officer," Caitlyn says.

Vi stops chewing and swallows the mess of noodles in one painful, ill-advised lump.

"Oh," she says. And then, not wanting to sound as judgemental as she feels, wanting to know more, she adds, "Yeah?"

"Indeed. Not for long. A year and a half, officially," Caitlyn hums, still staring into her wine. "My parents are—well, you know my father is a doctor. Not just any doctor, might I add, but the chief of surgery. My mother is a politician, fairly high up. I expect you've caught a glimpse of her on the news before. As you might imagine, they had all manner of expectations of me, and for whatever reason, I thought I could rebel against that by becoming a police officer. In my naivete, I thought it would embarrass them. Their only child, patrolling the streets in a uniform. In retrospect, it seems perfectly clear that by joining the police, I was only allying myself with their world."

"That why you quit? It didn't piss them off enough?"

Caitlyn shakes her head, finally looking up from her drink.

"I quit because I never ought to have joined. I was merely headstrong enough to think that I could eradicate the corruption from within. That I, a lone officer, could rebuild an entire institution. I suppose that was my parents' expectations shining through. All that privilege. Still, I soon realised that one of two things would happen: I would acquiesce, becoming part of the broken system, or I would find myself dead."

Vi nods slowly. She doesn't know anything about parental expectations, but she knows enough about the system. She's seen it from the inside, too, even if she and Caitlyn were on different sides. The knots in her stomach unravel. She reaches over the table, squeezing Caitlyn's hand.

"And so you became a journalist. Snooping around, digging up dirt on rich, powerful people," Vi

says, letting her touch linger. “Bet that pissed your folks off.”

“You’d win that bet,” Caitlyn says, but there’s no regret in her voice, her expression.

Not until Vi remembers to pull her hand away.

Vi finishes her mug of wine, then launches into her own line of investigation. Finding out when Caitlyn worked for the police, where she was stationed, and if their paths ever almost crossed. As she rattles off the questions, she wonders if Caitlyn opened up about that part of her life to put them on level ground; Caitlyn knows so much about her past, after all.

Vi shrugs to herself.

As long as she gets to keep talking, as long as the evening doesn’t wind to a close just yet, what does it matter?

*

Vi:

[IMG3002_Bd.png]

new shorts

Caitlyn brought up her uniform in that first interview. Vi reasons a glimpse at her new shorts can only help Caitlyn with her article; she is, after all, fond of research. Vi supposes she didn’t have to be *wearing* the shorts in the photo, and clearly *only* the shorts, even if the photo cuts off at her ribs.

The message is read instantly. Three dots pop up. Vi falls on her bed, holding her phone over her head, watching the dots disappear and reappear as Caitlyn types for whole minutes and then stops entirely.

Eventually, a reply appears.

Cait:

Did you design them yourself?

Vi:

Powder and my friend Ekko helped

what do you think?

like the flag

?

Cait:

Indeed. It does an effective job of breaking up an otherwise monotonous design.

Vi:

monotonous? ouch

alright miss bigshot journalist

what are YOU wearing?

Cait:

Excuse me?

Vi:

fair's fair

i showed you mine

Cait:

And at no point did I ask you to.

Vi:

lighten up Cupcake

it'll help with your research

Cait:

And sharing a photo of my outfit will help with my work how, exactly?

Vi:

it won't

but it'll make my day brighter

Cait:

You're absurd.

Vi:

is that a no

cause

Cait:

[IMG6594iW.png]

Vi:

i can be very persuasive

YEAH

there we go

The picture is a lot more modest than Vi's, with nothing about it designed to deliberately provoke. Caitlyn's taken the photo in a full-length mirror, face mostly obscured by her phone. She's wearing a navy-blue suit with a loose, cream blouse tucked into the pants. Vi frowns. Not at the photo, but her own reaction.

Cait:

Satisfied?

Vi:

hmmmmm

where ya going Cupcake?

Cait:

Nowhere exciting.

The supermarket.

Vi:

you're going food shopping

dressed like that?

jeez

lighten up!

lose the jacket

Cait:

[IMG9466oR.png]

Better?

Do I finally have your approval to venture out?

Vi:

hmmmm

that's better

maybe lose the shirt too

Cait:

You're ridiculous.

Vi laughs at her phone, throwing it on the bed before she dares push her luck any further. She makes a start on breakfast and the day's chores, pulling the sofa out to hoover there for the first time in forever. She's meeting Powder at eleven for a run in the local park, which gives her plenty of time to get her flat in order. It's been another busy few days, but not disastrously so.

Her phone *pings* as she's pulling her running shoes on.

It's another message from Caitlyn. Another photo.

Vi opens it and chokes on a laugh that's more a splutter of surprise than anything. It looks like Caitlyn eventually heeded her advice: the photo shows the cream-coloured shirt, discarded on a dark, mahogany floor. Vi can only assume it was taken in Caitlyn's bedroom.

Feeling heat prick the back of her neck, Vi rubs the bridge of her nose, caught between grinning and groaning. Running. She's going running with Powder. She can pretend she knows how to deal with this *later*.

*

After no fewer than four fights break out in the space of an hour, Vi finally gets a break. She takes the occasional shift at *The Last Drop* when Vander needs a hand and always solemnly refuses to be paid. She does, however, help herself to the drinks and snacks behind the bar.

Vi sits out back on an empty keg, downing one of those ridiculously expensive bottles of mixed fruits. As if on cue, a message flies in as she checks her phone for the first time all night.

Cait:

Sorry for the late hour. Are you busy, Vi?

Vi:

perfect timing Cupcake

just taking a break

Cait:

Wonderful.

I was wondering if you might have an email I could send a draft of my article to. There's no rush in reading it, but I'd like to get it to you post-haste.

Vi:

huh

was starting to think that was all a ruse to spend time with me

send it to vi_mma_inquiries@hexmail.com

that's my fancy work email

Cait:

I admit it's taken me longer to get a copy to you than I intended. As well you know, this isn't my area of expertise, and admittedly, this isn't the first draft. I've started over more times than I can count, but I am cautiously optimistic about this approach.

As I said, don't feel pressured to get back to me immediately. I understand how busy you are.

Vi:

aww that's sweet

wanted to make sure it was perfect for me huh

and i've got

maybe 20 minutes before i'm back on

that enough time for me to read?

Cait:

More than enough. I was only given a limited number of words to work with.

As I said, please read it at your leisure. I wouldn't want you wasting your whole break on this.

Vi:

nervous, Cupcake?

Cait:

Ridiculously so.

Vi has no retort for that. She thumbs over to her inbox and opens the email from Caitlyn, complete with a rather formal explanation about what she's sent, as though she didn't just discuss it with Vi over text.

Caitlyn wasn't lying. The article isn't long, though it's longer than anything written about Vi thus far. Vi settles against the wall, ignoring the swell of noise emanating from *The Last Drop*, and reads the article through. Vi isn't sure what she's expecting. A beginner's guide to MMA, because, *yes*, people really do enjoy watching people half-maul each other to death, along with a few footnotes about how, despite gaining notoriety by punching people, she still has enough brain cells left to acknowledge a few charities.

It isn't anything like that.

It's hardly about MMA at all. Or it is, but only as it pertains to Vi; only as it's part of her life, part of the journey she's on. Somehow, Vi didn't expect to be in the spotlight in an article about herself. It doesn't heap pity upon her like she feared. Not once does Caitlyn suggest that any part of Vi's past was something she stumbled into, something inevitable; nor does she frame Vi's achievements as being gained *despite* her roots. She talks about how the system, authorities and all, failed Vi and so many children like her; that's why Vi works so hard to put those issues in the spotlight.

(She also spares a paragraph to describe Vi's entrance to the ring, using all sorts of flattering words that make Vi's nose crinkle.)

Vi smiles. She locks her phone and lets her empty bottle roll to the floor. Her smile doesn't last long. Objectively, it's a good article. It's empathetic without turning her into a pity case. It's truthful, it's about someone who's made something of herself despite all the world's thrown against her, and it acknowledges the inequality, all that Vi never should've had to suffer.

She rereads it. She chews on her thumbnail.

It's a good article. It's a good enough article to make it sound like it's about a good person. And damn if Caitlyn isn't a good writer; she gets Vi believing it really is about her.

Vi gets to her feet. She turns in a useless circle. Mercifully, the roar of another fight breaks out in the bar, and Vi shoves her phone in her back pocket as she runs inside.

*

The next few days are busier than ever. Vi has training, runs deliveries for three evenings straight, and takes Powder to an emergency counselling session. She also—well, she cleans her flat three times, trains some more, helps Ekko with a project, trains some more, and what do you know: she barely has time to check her phone.

Caitlyn likely has a dozen of other stories she's working on. There's no way this is a top priority, especially since Vi doesn't hear from her again.

Not until Thursday morning, four days after Vi opened the article.

Cait:

Again, no rush, but feel free to let me know about any changes you'd like made by email, text, or in person.

And I apologise profusely. Upon rereading the article over, I noticed a misplaced semi-colon. I assure you, the final, printed version will be much more carefully vetted.

It's gone midday by the time Vi replies.

Vi:

i read it

Cait:

You did?

Vi:

yeah

same night you sent it

Cait:

Oh. I see.

If you have the time spare, might I ask what you thought?

Vi:

you're a really good writer

Cait:

Thank you.

And you’re rather proficient in avoiding the question.

Vi:

it's just

look

you said we can talk in person?

Cait:

We can. My schedule is flexible, so let me know a time that works for you.

Vi:

i'm free now

Cait:

I’m happy to meet up, or I can come to you, since I now know my way through the labyrinth you dwell in.

Whatever’s best for you, Vi.

Vi:

can i come to yours?

Cait:

Most certainly.

[CAIT is now sharing their location with you]

Caitlyn's flat is nothing like Vi's. It's on the other side of town, in one of the shiny, new purpose-built buildings, with a foyer like a fancy hotel. Letter boxes line one wall, benches are set out, and columns hold up the high ceiling. There's even a concierge who stares at Vi as she takes in the polished floors and fancy light fixtures.

Vi calls the elevator down. The back wall is mirrored, showing Vi her messy hair, the dark marks under her eyes, her hunched shoulders. She glances over the buttons, scoffing at the ones labelled *gym* and *restaurant*, and hits the top floor. The lift whizzes up. Vi buries her hands in her hoodie pockets and rocks on the balls of her feet.

Caitlyn is waiting for her, stood at the open door. Her face is rife with worry, but Vi can't discern its source. She could be worried professionally, anxious over having done a bad job, but she could equally be worried about Vi. Vi hates that. She hates that she's making such a big deal about it, that she cares about an article that no one's ever going to read.

"Would you like a drink? Some tea?" Caitlyn asks as she ushers Vi in.

"Sure," Vi murmurs.

Caitlyn will feel better if she has a task to busy herself with

Vi takes in Caitlyn's flat. It's massive; the whole of Vi's place could fit in the living room alone. Floor to ceiling windows offer a view of the town and countryside beyond, and three doors lead off the living room. Caitlyn disappears into one. Vi hears the familiar *click* of a kettle.

Paintings line Caitlyn's walls. *Actual* paintings, not just prints. There are weighty, expensive-looking sculptures on the coffee table and cabinets, along with framed photos of Caitlyn's family. Vi crouches down, squinting at one. She doesn't want to get her fingerprints all over the polished glass, but if that house in the background is where Caitlyn grew up—fuck.

Vi can't believe she invited Caitlyn over to her place.

Caitlyn returns in a few minutes with more than mugs of tea. She's holding a tray, complete with a porcelain teapot, cups on saucers, a small pitcher of milk, and a silver dish full of sugar.

It's ridiculous enough to ease some of the tension from Vi's shoulders.

They sit on the sofa, enough space between them for another person, and Caitlyn goes to great efforts not to comment on the amount of sugar Vi shovels into her tea.

"If I said *anything* upsetting or otherwise offensive in my article, I do apologise, Vi. As I said, I won't so much as consider posting anything without your permission," Caitlyn begins, nerves getting the better of her. "I ought to have given you more warning, too, but I was far too eager to —"

"It's not that. It's not what you wrote, it's—it's me," Vi says, scowling at her reflection in the tiny teacup cradled between her hands.

"It's you? I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Like I said, you're a good writer. It was a good piece! I'm not a big reader, but it kept my attention, but—it wasn't right. It wasn't about me. I think I misled you or gave you the wrong impression. And that's not your fault. I just don't want you publishing something about someone who isn't me."

Caitlyn is silent for a long moment. Vi feels the sofa dip next to her as Caitlyn turns to face her, teacup on the table, feet tucked up beneath herself.

Vi manages a glance. The corner of her mouth twitches, and she goes back to staring at the tea.

"Surely you understand that I am *very* thorough in my research, Vi. Not only did I interview you, but I watched every fight of yours I could find footage of, spent time with you inside your home, and even spoke with your sister," Caitlyn says.

That gets Vi to look up.

"You talked to Powder? When? Why?"

Caitlyn sits straighter, hands held up in defence.

"I meant no intrusion, I promise. It might be more accurate to say Powder talked to *me*. See, I returned to *The Last Drop* a little over a week ago, hoping I might run into you. Obviously, you weren't there, but your sister appeared to recognise me," Caitlyn explains. "She was only too happy to tell me all about you and your career. She's rather fond of you, Vi."

Putting the teacup down, Vi presses a thumb between her eyes. Dammit, Powder. She lets out a shaky breath and finds a weak smile.

"I'm lucky to have her. I'm lucky she still wants me around. After—after everything that happened, I abandoned her. She was out there, on her own, thrown around the system. And she went through *so* much, Cait, if she hadn't ended up with Vander, with someone who actually gives a shit, I think I would've lost her," Vi says.

"Vi," Caitlyn says firmly, hand resting on her shoulder. "You didn't abandon your sister. From all you've told me, along with all my additional research, it's clear you did *everything* you could for her when you were only a child yourself. You were incarcerated, Vi. You didn't leave her behind."

"Yeah. Yeah," Vi mumbles. She's repeated the same to herself time and time again, Vander's given the same speech, and even Powder accepts it for the truth. Vi wonders when it'll finally sink into her bones. "Look. I don't mean to—I don't know what I'm doing here. It's just the story you

wrote. It wasn't about me. I *wish* it was about me. It was about someone good, someone who's made something of themselves, someone who—who deserves all those things?"

Vi doesn't know what she's trying to say. Her head pounds, only clearing when she realises Caitlyn's hand is on the side of her neck, her thumb swiping half-circles against the corner of her jaw.

"Vi," Caitlyn says, only it's soft, this time. "I'm an *excellent* journalist. Every word I wrote was about you, inspired *by* you. It's your story, Vi. You simply allowed me to tell it."

Vi wants to argue. She wants to bolt to her feet and march out of the apartment, out of the fancy building with its shiny floors and warm lighting, but Caitlyn's hand is on her face. If there's anything anchoring her to reality, forcing her to see herself clearly, it's that.

"See? What did I tell you?" Vi asks, leaning into the touch. "You really are sweet."

Caitlyn's lips part. When she speaks, Vi knows it isn't what she wants to say.

"Then I can publish it? Or submit it for approval, at the very least."

"Mmhmm."

Caitlyn bolts to her feet, victorious and flustered. The warmth of her touch lingers on Vi's cheek.

"Wonderful. Excellent. I'll email my editor at once," Caitlyn declares, disappearing into one of the adjoining rooms in search of her laptop.

Vi waits until she's out of the room to fall against the back of the sofa, hands pressed to her face. She laughs at herself, at the situation, at—what? At what she thought was going to happen? Shit. Caitlyn's a professional, doing her job, and she took time out of her day to deal with Vi's maudlin bout of self-doubt.

Still.

Vi thinks she might really believe every word Caitlyn said and wrote.

*

Vi:

[IMG6943_rE.png]

Cait:

Forgive me for asking, but what IS that?

Vi:

new stain on the bar

it looks kinda like a bear

Cait:

It looks like a stain on a bar, barely in focus.

Vi:

BEARLY in focus?

Cait:

That isn't what I said. You have a verbatim log of my every word.

Vi:

sorry miss-i-write-for-a-living

Powder thinks it looks like a bear

Cait:

It must be genetic.

But on the subject of writing for a living, I'm happy to announce that my article was approved for publication. It'll be in Friday's edition.

Vi:

shit

that soon huh?

do you think anyone will actually read it

Cait:

We have one of the largest reader bases in the country.

Vi:

well

bring it on

y'know

Cait:

I'm out of town until Friday, but we ought to celebrate on the Saturday.

Vi:

we should celebrate, Cupcake

Cait:

Hah.

Then we're in agreement.

Vi:

great minds

my place or yours?

Cupcake:

I am quite content either way, but I would enjoy the opportunity to cook for you.

Vi:

seriously?

you'd cook for me?

Cupcake:

Anything you'd like.

Vi:

i'll let you surprise me

*

Vi's awoken early Friday morning by Powder bursting into her flat and throwing herself on the bed. She's not only read the article, but she's already cut it out and framed it. Vi laughs, promising to hang it somewhere prominent, and spends the day idling around town with Powder. Vi treats herself to a new shirt, because why the hell not, then picks up an extra shift at *The Last Drop* in hopes the night will fly by.

It doesn't.

She gets her phone out to text Caitlyn more than once but always decides against it. Caitlyn's out of town, which means she's doing something fancy and exciting, or, god forbid, spending time with her family in their mansion.

Vi stays up late and wakes early. It's stupid. She's stupid. It's just dinner, Caitlyn is just professional; this is a last farewell, because they won't be working together anymore.

She spends the day watching the clock. The moment it turns five, Vi throws herself into the shower. She dries her hair out and combes it into place; she puts her new shirt on and, for the first time in her life, idly wishes she owned an iron.

She takes the world's slowest walk across town, then paces back and forth outside Caitlyn's building until it's near-enough half six. Vi takes the lift up, foot tapping impatiently as it climbs the endless floors.

Caitlyn isn't waiting in the doorway this time, though she knows she's there. Vi had to buzz her flat to get access to the building. Vi falters in the hallway, clearing her throat before knocking on the door.

Caitlyn appears moments later, and Vi stares blankly at her, as though she didn't expect to find Caitlyn in her own apartment. Caitlyn, too, is wearing something new. Or something that *looks* new. It's hard to say with her wardrobe; everything she's worn thus far has been immaculate.

Her long, dark hair is loose around her shoulders, and she's wearing a skirt that just about reaches her knees. Vi clears her throat again. She's painfully aware of her hands and curses herself for not bringing wine or flowers, something, anything to distract herself with.

"Do come in," Caitlyn says, stepping to the side.

"Hey, Cupcake. You look…" Vi begins, trailing off as she catches the scent wafting from the kitchen. "Wow. Something smells good."

Caitlyn's face reddens. She hurries back into the kitchen, calling, "Not long now. Please, take a seat."

Shrugging her jacket off and hanging it by the door, Vi makes her way to the dining room table. It's an *actual* table, nothing like the old, plastic garden furniture Vi has on her balcony. Vi runs her fingertips over the smooth surface, then picks up the glass of wine waiting for her. She sniffs it, fairly certain that's what you're supposed to do with wine, and discovers it smells like wine.

It's a good thing she didn't embarrass herself with corner store wine. This bottle probably cost a month of Vi's earnings.

Caitlyn brings the food in, going so far as to pull Vi's seat out for her. In all honesty, Vi doesn't know what the meal *is*. It looks almost too delicate to eat, has a long, complicated French name, and is absolutely nothing like anything she's ever been served.

Vi takes a tentative bite, if only to quell Caitlyn's nerves. Vi hums around the mouthful, surprised by each burst of flavour, then scoops up a proper forkful.

"Damn, Cupcake. You're talented. Writing, looking like that, *this*," Vi says, grabbing one of the napkins – napkins! – to wipe the corners of her mouth.

Caitlyn smiles through her sip of wine.

“I’m glad it’s to your liking. I must admit, I ventured all the way back to the high street to visit the Chinese we got dinner from that one night,” Caitlyn says. “I’m afraid I can scarcely compare.”

“Well, look at that. I’m rubbing off on you,” Vi says.

“I ought to be more adventurous with my dining habits. We *never* had takeaway in my household. It simply wasn’t done.”

“Shit. And I thought I was the one with the tragic past. Is that where you were this week? Visiting your folks?”

Caitlyn shakes her head. She finishes her mouthful and dabs at the corners of her mouth, considering her answer. Vi grips her fork a little tighter, worried she’s crossed some line.

“I was called to give evidence, actually,” Caitlyn eventually says.

Vi tilts her head to the side.

“I wonder if you heard of the recent scandal within the police department,” Caitlyn says.

Vi goes to shake her head, but her memory catches up with her.

“Uh, yeah. All that shit with the Sheriff, Marcus, right? It was everywhere! It was all anyone was talking about for weeks.”

“I may have uncovered said scandal,” Caitlyn says, and returns to her dinner.

Vi stares at her across the table. Vi isn’t naïve enough to think that removing Sheriff Marcus from power will change anything in the long run, but *god,* the man made it his life’s mission to hound Vi and her family. Another few years with him in power – hell, another few *months* – and Vi might’ve found herself back in a cell.

“Wait, wait. Seriously? That was *you*? Fuck, Cupcake. Why didn’t you say? I’ve never seen *The Last Drop* as busy as it was the night he was busted. Shit, as soon as Vander finds out, you’ll have free drinks for life,” Vi says, beaming across the table.

“Yes. Well. It was all rather intense at the time, and I thought it therapeutic to distance myself from it. I became… rather obsessive for a good long time. My editor believed – believes – that I have put myself in a modicum of danger, hence the lighter assignments I have been granted, of late,” Caitlyn explains.

Chin propped in her palms, grin now a permanent part of her features, Vi holds Caitlyn’s gaze until she blushes. No wonder she *ran* when they first met.

“Part of me was wondering what you were doing, chasing me around. I mean, look at all this! You don’t need to be wasting your time with me. But—you know, maybe it’s a good thing. If you *are* in danger, you’ve ended up with someone who’ll beat anyone who bothers you to a pulp.”

“I never thought of it like that. Only ever a text away,” Caitlyn hums. “And this latest venture was no waste of time. It has broadened my skills as a journalist. It’s reassuring to know I can write stories of worth that *don’t* lead to corrupt police officers making a target of me.”

“Keep hanging out with me and that’ll change real fast.”

Caitlyn laughs. They finish dinner, and though Caitlyn insists it’s fine, honestly, Vi helps take the

dishes to the kitchen. The kitchen big enough to have an *island* at the centre. Vi lets out a low whistle, taking it all in, and Caitlyn ushers her out, telling her to get comfortable on the balcony.

Vi relents and lets herself outside. Unsurprisingly, Caitlyn has actual furniture out there, too—one of those outdoor sofas that you store the cushions inside to protect from the elements, only she's put them all into place for the evening. Vi's stomach tightens. Caitlyn really has thought this all through.

Vi takes a seat, half wishing she'd grabbed her jacket. There's only the slightest breeze, but—no, no. It's perfect. Caitlyn will be there soon, and Vi will—

Well, she'll do *something*.

Caitlyn appears soon after with a tray, boasting two mugs of hot chocolate absolutely swimming in marshmallows.

"Cupcake," Vi says, arching a brow. "You just made me the fanciest meal of my life, and now there's *hot chocolate* for dessert? And here I was thinking you were pulling a souffle together out there."

"Please don't think all my tastes are needlessly pretentious and refined," Caitlyn says, settling on the sofa closer than Vi dared to hope for.

Well. It's Caitlyn's balcony, her bench. Why shouldn't she get comfortable?

"That why you've invited me over, huh?"

Caitlyn says nothing but taps Vi's nose. Vi goes cross-eyed trying to focus on Caitlyn's finger, then follows her lead. She settles back with her hot chocolate, watching the sky slowly darken. They sit there in silence for a long time, long enough for Vi's mug to cool in her hands, and Vi becomes *very* aware of how long they've gone without looking at one another.

She dares to glance Caitlyn's way, only to find her leant forward, placing her empty cup back on the tray. Vi does the same. She settles back on the sofa, stretches out her arms, and finally looks Caitlyn's way.

"Listen—" Vi begins.

She doesn't get far. Not with Caitlyn's hand on her face. Especially not with Caitlyn closer than she was mere moments ago; not when Caitlyn leans in, brushing their lips lightly but wholly together. *Thank god*, is all Vi can think. Now she doesn't have to find a way to initiate it, doesn't have to convince herself Caitlyn won't pull away in disgust.

It's the exact opposite. Caitlyn's arms wrap around Vi's shoulders, and with her legs tucked under her, she shifts her weight onto her knees to deepen the kiss. Vi splays her hands across Caitlyn's back, humming into the kiss. For a moment, Vi's too caught up in the fact of it happening to feel it, but it's only a moment.

Caitlyn lets out a soft gasp against her mouth as she discovers the scar on Vi's lower lip. Grinning into the kiss, Vi pulls Caitlyn closer until she's half in her lap. Caitlyn's kisses grow deeper, hungrier, until Vi feels her lips trail across the line of her jaw, breath on her ear.

Vi's name unfurls on Caitlyn's lips, and that one solitary syllable turns the blood in her veins to pure, brilliant lava.

“Cait,” Vi murmurs, one hand in her hair, now.

It isn’t a question, but Caitlyn takes the opportunity to answer.

“Do you have any idea—*any idea*—how long I’ve wanted to do this?” Caitlyn says, voice taut.

She’s as caught off-guard by her breathlessness and the low, rumbling desire in her voice as Vi is.

“Yeah?” Vi asks, trailing her fingertips across the shell of Caitlyn’s ear and watching her shiver against her. “Why’d you wait?”

“Because—because I’m a journalist! Because there are a set of ethics, Vi, and I couldn’t have the integrity of my work called into question. It wouldn’t just be this piece. It would leave me open to attack on *all* of my publications,” Caitlyn says, voice thick with frustration.

“Wow, Cupcake,” Vi says, nuzzling her nose against Caitlyn’s neck and leaving soft, lingering kisses. “You really are a goody-two-shoes.”

Caitlyn clicks her tongue, but the irritation doesn’t last long. Vi kisses her neck in earnest, in the way she’s wanted to for so long, and Caitlyn presses flush against her, truly in her lap, now.

“What did it for you?” Vi asks, calloused hands running along the thighs straddling her lap. Thank fuck Caitlyn chose a skirt for the evening. “Was it the shorts?”

“The photo you sent me?” Caitlyn asks, lifting her hips with Vi’s touch. “Hardly. That was *far* too obvious. I’m not that easily won over.”

Vi hums. Caitlyn’s fingers brush the short, shaved sides of Vi’s hair.

“I see. So being pinned against that alley wall did it for you?”

“Stop that,” Caitlyn chides, catching Vi in a deep, rhythmic kiss.

Vi’s hands are well and truly under Caitlyn’s skirt, now, and she draws impatient crescents on her hips with her thumbs. Caitlyn breaks the kiss, fingers running through Vi’s hair, and it takes everything in Vi to hold Caitlyn’s gaze and not let herself look down at her lap, at the skirt bunched around Caitlyn’s stomach and her own hands gripping her thighs.

She doesn’t only fail but delights in letting herself give in.

Caitlyn allows it for all of a second. She cups Vi’s chin in her hand, tilts her head up, and smiles in a way that sends Vi’s heartbeat straight between her legs.

“Well, Vi?” Caitlyn asks. “Are we going to keep talking, or are you going to take me to my bed?”

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